

Re-membering the Tutsi Genocide in *Hotel Rwanda* (2004): Negotiating Reality, History, Autobiography and Fiction

By
Okaka Opio Dokotum (Ph.D)
Kyambogo University
Kampala, Uganda
Email: Okakadok@yahoo.com
Mobile: +256703408982

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Abstract

This paper examines how Terry George's film *Hotel Rwanda* participates in memory reconstruction and the intricacies of adapting history to the screen which creates complex and problematic negotiations between reality, history, autobiography, and fiction. The "Based on a True Story" trademark of the film has implications for entertainment and for genocide memory. The paper examines the intertextual collage between Rusesabagina's (auto)biography and the film to show its impact on reality and truth as well as the problem of cultural hybridity that comes with collaborative authorship by Rusesabagina and Zoellner (2006). At the centre of this paper is examination of the conflicting concept of heroism; Hollywood's self-transcendent hero verses communal heroes according to records at the Kigali Genocide Memorial. Finally, this paper examines the impact of *Hotel Rwanda* on post genocide peace and reconciliation.

Bio

Okaka Opio Dokotum is a Senior Lecturer and Acting Chair of the Literature Department, at Kyambogo University in Uganda, where he teaches literature and film. His current research area is, "Contemporary Euro-American Filmic Representations of Africa: Reproducing the Colonial Template."

Introduction

Literary and film artists, scholars and critics continue to grapple with the memory of the 1994 Tutsi genocide. Terry George's film *Hotel Rwanda* participates in this enterprise through trauma aesthetic that saw the adaptation of the de Mille Collines episode of Rwandan genocide history to the screen. The complex negotiations between reality, history, autobiography, and fiction and controversy surrounding the film raises challenges for the concept of artistic responsibility, which entails producing aesthetically pleasing work while upholding fidelity to history. *Hotel Rwanda* is based on the life and testimony of Hotel Manager Paul Rusesabagina, later textualised in his (auto) biography *An Ordinary Man: the True Story Behind Hotel Rwanda* (2006). The film narrates how Rusesabagina saved the lives of 1268 Tutsis and moderate Hutu's from Interahamwe death squads while the international community looked away. *Hotel Rwanda* gripped the imagination of the world and was lauded for publicising the 1994 Tutsi Genocide, which was seriously underreported at the time, but has been criticized by film and history scholars for exaggerating Rusesabagina's heroism, for ignoring the history behind the genocide and for trivializing the violence. The lack of historical context for the Rwandan genocide also makes the violence meaningless and consequently fits into the "Dark Continent" narrative trope of Africa where violence is portrayed as a way of life. Above all, the film was criticized for undermining the role of other key players in protecting the lives of the hotel refugees and for tampering with the reality of events at de Mille Collines in order to inflate Rusesabagina's heroic image.

Recent critical scholarship have highlighted the historical and political roots of the Rwandan genocide, and some have pointed out the ineptness of *Hotel Rwanda* in that regard (See

Mamdani, 2000; Kinzer 2004; Dallaire & Beardsley, 2004; Melvern, 2006; Ndahiro & Rutazibwa, 2008). This paper does not explore in detail the historical issues behind the genocide but examines the authenticity of Rusesabagina's memory, the film director's claim to artistic responsibility and its contestation by high witness accounts of some de Mille Collines survivors. I also examine the "Based on a True Story" trademark of the film in order to address the following questions; What does it mean for *Hotel Rwanda* to be based on a "True Story?" Which story is being told in *Hotel Rwanda* and whose story? I also examine the Intertextual collage between Rusesabagina's autobiography and the film as a case of adaptation and its impact on reality and truth since the autobiography was produced two years after the film. I also address the problem of cultural hybridity that comes with collaborative authorship of the (auto)biography by Rusesabagina and Zoellner (2006) and its impact on the originality of Rusesabagina's de Mille Collines narrative. At the core of this paper is an examination of the conflicting concept of heroism; Hollywood's (western) "self-transcendent" hero verses communal heroism according to records at the Kigali Genocide Memorial. If Rusesabagina is not a Rwandan hero but a mythologized Hollywood hero as some have declared, how much of this manipulation is Rusesabagina's imagination and how much is influenced by the classical Hollywood narrative style? Finally, this paper examines the impact of *Hotel Rwanda* on Rusesabagina and on Rwanda, locally and internationally, and what it means for post genocide peace and reconciliation.

Memory re-construction in *Hotel Rwanda*

Of all the films about the Rwandan genocide, *Hotel Rwanda* stands out as the most successful. This is remarkable when one considers that the film is about Africa and about violence of the

most extreme kind. Part of this success is because the director steered away from showing the violence directly on screen and instead chose to celebrate the triumph of humanity through the noble actions of Paul Rusesabagina. The violence we see in *Hotel Rwanda* is minimized and only shown indirectly. We see a typical massacre scene from the hotel room through the video footage, which was distanced by the extreme long shot and further minimized by the small TV screen. The other evidence of the killings are seen in the blood on Rusesabagina's son, intimating that the neighbours had been hacked to death. The nearest *Hotel Rwanda* comes to showing the horror of the genocide is when Rusesabagina and Gregoire bump over what seems like miles of dead bodies scattered on River Road. The sound of flies buzzing adds to the eeriness of the scene, but even here, the director mitigates the impact of the pictures "through the softening effect of pre-dawn darkness and swirling fog" (2007, p. 291). This makes it easy for the viewer to watch the film without dealing with the horror of the genocide.

The acting is also remarkable, especially Don Cheadle's portrayal of Paul Rusesabagina which won him an Oscar nomination for best actor. Apart from its cinematic force, the director claims he accurately represented the story of Rusesabagina and the reality of the de Mille Collines episode. This is a claim that needs investigation because it has an impact on genocide memory, on the healing of the survivors of de Mille Collines, and on post genocide reconciliation. John Dean observes that there is a big distinction between history and memory; "History is then, memory is now. Memory is the past remembered and reconstructed through the lens of the present and its building blocks" (2009, para. 6). Historical movies are mediated by the present context of their production including the political and cultural economy of production and consumption and must "entertain the sensibilities of the present" (para, 6). Because of the

dictatorship of the present over historical reenactments, memory re-contextualizes history. The problem with memory on the other hand is that it relies on individual recollection selectively invoked to suit the narrator's purpose. The consequence of historical filmic reconstruction through memory, therefore, is that "history inevitably gets short-changed" (para, 6). Dean further argues that the relation between movies and history are "more a connection rather than a similarity, an association rather than nearness." He then poses a critical question; "The viewer can expect a movie to be like literature. But can you expect a movie to be history?" (2009 para. 7). This question underscores the dilemma of relying on a movie like *Hotel Rwanda* as a storehouse of genocide memory and as an instrument for explaining the events of the genocide. Although movies have a connection and association to fact, they are by the nature of their narrative construction, fictional. Thomas Leitch is of the same view that movies can be useful records of history, but "they can no more be accurate records of the historical events they purport to represent" (2009, p. 282). Film textualizes history through memory by authorial/autorial mediation, fictionalized restaging, actors' discourses, and the overall political economy of film production from screenplay to the hyper-commercialized box office factor. Films about the past became in many ways films about the present or even about distant places codified within historical locations. This shows the "ahistorical nature of historical films" (Saab 715), especially since as David Lubin bluntly put it, "the past...does not buy tickets" (qtd. in Saab, 715). With all the good intentions and sense of social responsibility of director's like Terry George, history is only profitable to the movies as raw material for powerful fictional reconstruction that can bring in monetary returns, moreover, history can be rewritten in movies for propaganda. By locating his film within the "based on a true story" cinematic trope, George makes a strategic claim that his film is a reliable historical account, but this is a claim made to boost the film's entertainment

and commercial value. Yet this claim to historical veracity creates competing discourses that complicate the search for the truth of what happened at de Mille Collines.

This issue would not be so controversial if the filmmaker had not insisted on the absolute truthfulness of his account of Rusesabagina's heroic role at Hotel de Mille Collins. George reinforced this position directly while reacting in the *Washington Post* to growing contestations of Rusesabagina's heroism as constructed in his film *Hotel Rwanda*. He termed such dissenting discourses, "smearing a Hero" and "sad revisionism" as he upheld the absolute veracity of his account;

To make a film of a true story you must compress timelines, create composite characters and dramatize emotions. When it came to making "Hotel Rwanda" — the story of how Paul Rusesabagina *saved* the lives of hundreds of people who took shelter from the 1994 genocide in the hotel he managed—I was obsessed with *getting it right* [My emphasis](George, p. A 25).

The director says he "grilled Rusesabagina" and read extensively about Rusesabagina's experience, shuttled back and forth between Brussels and Kigali, and even met survivors from Hotel de Mille Collins and "No one contradicted his story" (p. A 25). While the director acknowledges the fact that a filmmaker must use dramatic license to reorganize reality in order to retell the story with infectiousness, Terry George insists that in the case of *Hotel Rwanda*, he actually got it all "right." Interestingly, many survivors from the hotel as well as UMANIR troops stationed at the hotel then and international journalist who were in Kigali at the time have seriously contested Rusesabagina's heroism. Alfred Ndahiro and Privat Rutazibwa interviewed 74 survivors of Hotel de Mille Collins and additionally other high witnesses of the drama of

survival at the hotel and a majority conclude that Terry George the film director relied less on objective research and heavily on Rusesabagina's testimony. In their book *Hotel Rwanda: Or the Tutsi Genocide as Seen by Hollywood* (2008), Ndahiro and Rutazibwa allege that the filmmakers worked with Rusesabagina's single story and ignored other competing stories about what really happened at Hotel de Mille Collins the fateful April May and June of '94. "It is he [Rusesabagina], at the end of the day, who created the screenplay based on his memories," they say. "It is he, at the end of the day, who told his story, at the same time erecting his own statue" (Ndahiro & Rutazibwa, 2008, p. 10). I know for certain that Rusesabagina did not write the screenplay, but he provided the story for the screenplay. Rusesabagina was also the Special Consultant to the film producers, United Artists and Lion Gate Films, which gave him tremendous influence in shaping what we see in the film.

This leads to the question, whose account of reality is correct? Either Terry George is deceived, or the survivors of Hotel de Mille Collines that Ndahiro and Rutazibwa interviewed lied, or we are dealing here with the phenomenon of "historical pluralism" which "presupposes either a number of equally plausible accounts of the historical past or, alternatively, a number of different but equally meaningful constructions" of the same historical event (White, 2010, p. 226). To buy the idea of historical pluralism would be to abandon the search for truth about what happened at Hotel de Mille Collines and embrace fiction. As Hyden White argues, all narrative history, oral, written [and visual], have elements of fiction embedded in them just by the nature of their textualized production through what he calls "emplotment" (2010, pp. 280-281). Emplotment is the act of reorganizing the raw material of reality into a coherent fictional story, which is precisely what scripting a screenplay does by fictionalizing reality. Screenplay transforms the

story from the raw material of reality into a literary/cinematic product through the plot. The reality or fact of life as it is/was lived is refracted through the literary process of scripting before cinematic realization; a process that involves fictionalization.

If we presume that literature is a purely imaginary mode of expression and representation, then of course the issue of the “realism” and veracity of any historical account cast in an identifiably literary form is resolved in advance (2010, p. 281).

Understanding the concept of “emplotment”, helps explain the metamorphosis of the de Mille Collines episode into the “story” of Rusesabagina, which became the screenplay, *Hotel Rwanda*. The screenplay is in turn influenced by the rules of the historical film genre, the cultural influence of Hollywood, and multiple mediations by actors and producers interpretations, as well as the South African location of the film’s shoot. Every step away from life as experienced in Hotel de Mille Collins during the genocide distanced the narrative from reality.

Based on a “true story”!

The question then arises, is *Hotel Rwanda* based on a true story? Even if we were to say, yes, what exactly does it mean for it to be “based” on a “true story”? One thing it does not mean,” Thomas Leitch argues, “is that the film is an accurate record of historical events” since the claim is “always strategic or generic rather than historical or existential” (Leitch 2009, p. 282). The idea of “true story” is complicated further by the ambiguity of the verb “based” on. As Leitch further observes, it implies that “even before the film was made, a story was circulating that was not just about actual events but was a true story account of them, as if *extracting* a story from actual events or *imposing* a story on them was not unproblematic [My emphases] (2009, p. 282). Story implies narrative composition oral or written. To say *Hotel Rwanda* is “based on a true

story” means the film is based on a *complete* story weaved from the actual events as they unfolded, which indicates an element of tampering with facts in order to “extract” what the narrator needs or to “impose” a story on top of the actual events. Whichever way you look at it, the film *Hotel Rwanda* is to a large degree removed from the reality of what happened at de Mille Collines. Hyden White explains that historical facts in themselves cannot constitute a story, but provide “story *elements*” at best. For it to become a “story” it has to be *made* by “the suppression or subordination of certain... [elements] and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone, and point of view... (White, 1985, p. 84). While some aspects of historical actuality about the Rwandan genocide are invoked in *Hotel Rwanda*, other aspects are concealed.

Dudley Andrew argues that “Based on a true story” films be treated as adaptations, and that “true story” appeals to a transcendent “Master text” that is more reliable than history, reality or even truth (qtd. in Leitch 2009, p. 285). Before I proceed, there is need to define the word adaptation which implies a break from the original to a repackaging in order to fit new contexts. It is the process of textualization through memory construction—oral or written—, selective ideological construction through the screenplay, and the eventual visual layout. The primary meaning of adaptation comes from its Latin etymology “*ad*—“near, adjacent to,” and *aptus*: “to fasten, to fit.” The secondary meaning is derived “as something “broken up” and remade totally anew” adapted to newer social and commercial sense” (Dean, 2009, para. 13). He further observes that, “In the movie business, as opposed to the history business, authentic does not mean factually erudite. It means coherence. It means history recast in fresh dramatic form” (2009, para. 20). That coherence and dramatic effect in film must be achieved at all cost if the box office tally is to

be impressive. This calls for, “tinkering and alterations, additions and subtractions), individual efforts and collaborative” (2009, para. 74). At the end of the production process is the audience who actually determine the final product. In *Hotel Rwanda*’s case, it is Hollywood’s primary constituents, the American and wider western audience.

Reading *Hotel Rwanda* as an adaptation from Rwandan history as well as a “true story” from Rusesabagina’s testimony and Terry George’s supplementary research has interpretive implications. It brings in concerns about cultural translation and fidelity to history, and to the memory of genocide victims. How reliable is the memory of Paul Rusesabagina? How faithful are the screenplay writers to Rusesabagina’s testimony, and to Rwandan history, and how are these deployed in the film *text*? Job Jabiro, a de Mille Collins survivor appreciates the film but scorns the idea of its historical veracity saying he is “glad the movie was not nominated for the best true storyline. It would have lost miserably” (2008, p. 21). Ndahiro and Rutazibwa acknowledge the inevitable dramatic license needed in the reconstruction of historical films but maintain that the makers of *Hotel Rwanda* are guilty of misrepresenting the genocide and promoting genocide negationism by creating a false hero out of someone who aligns himself openly with the genocidaires (2008, p. 39). The authors pose a few questions: “Did the film’s producer intentionally distort reality? Or is the lie only the doing of his technical consultant?” In any case, if Rusesabagina lied, was he seeking “fame and glory” or was he merely an opportunist trying to survive? (40). However controversial these claims might be, the “true story” tag of *Hotel Rwanda* is highly problematic for genocide memory at large.

Autobiography as adaptation

Which brings me to Rusesabagina's autobiography, *An Ordinary Man: The True Story Behind Hotel Rwanda* (2006). The autobiography also flies the "true Story" flag, only this time it is more authentic because it is the master text behind the film. The Author's Note states, "All of the people and events described herein are *true* as I *remember* them" [My emphases] (viii). The disclaimer means the "Truth" in the autobiography and by implication, in *Hotel Rwanda* is limited to his memory, yet in he acknowledges several sources in the bibliography and one can discern traces of among others; Gourevitch (1998), Mamdani (2002), and Dallaire and Beardsley (2004). How did the author *remember* the events from his childhood to the height of the Tutsi Genocide? What are the elaborations and what are the silences? How is the memory constructed in relation to the film *Hotel Rwanda*? This autobiography just like the film received international acclaim and was "ranked as one of the classics of tolerance literature" together with Thomas Kenneally's *Schindler's List*, Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, and Elie Wiesel's *Night* (2008, p. 13). Published two years after the film's release, a reverse influence of the film on the contents of the autobiography is inevitable. A look at the opening sentence of *An Ordinary Man* attest to *Hotel Rwanda*'s influence on the autobiography; "My name is Paul Rusesabagina. I am a Hotel Manager. In April 1994, when a wave of mass murder broke out in my country, I was able to hide 1,268 people inside the hotel where I worked" (viii). The narrative premise of the autobiography follows the heroic construct of Rusesabagina in the film *Hotel Rwanda*. It is important to note that Rusesabagina wrote the autobiography after the Genocide, and at a time when he was neither hotel manager nor living in Rwanda, yet he freezes on the hotel manager stage and appropriates the heroic acts attributed to the Rusesabagina character acted powerfully by Don Cheadle. In fact, the author acknowledges above all other sources, Keir Pearson and Terry George's "masterful screenplay of the movie *Hotel Rwanda*" now published as *Hotel*

Rwanda: Bringing the True Story of an African Hero to Film (2005). Just like in the film, all other important players in the survival of the hotel refugees are eliminated or downplayed in the autobiography. Although the autobiography covers comprehensively Rusesabagina's life from childhood until the events of the Rwandan genocide, the flash back and reminiscences are constructed to highlight his future role as savior at Hotel de Mille Collines. He tells us how he first learnt the art of negotiation as a child (2006, p. 47), how he sharpened his negotiating skills as a hotel manager, (pp. 62-63) which would prove significant in negotiating with the genocidaires for the lives of men and women. He narrates how his father with prophetic precision chose for him the surname Rusesabagina, which means "Warrior that disperses the enemies" (pp. 47-48), to show his future humanitarian and political role. He chose for himself the Christian name Paul "after the great communicator of the New Testament" underscoring his power of rhetoric which was manifested in charming the killers. Nothing underscores this point like his statement in the introduction; "Today I am convinced that the *only thing* that saved those 1,268 people in my hotel was words. Not liquor, not money, not the UN. Just ordinary words directed against the darkness" [My emphases] (p. xvii). He describes his namesake Paul as "the man who described himself in one of his letters as being "all things to all people" (p. 48), again the perfect image of the Paul Rusesabagina of *Hotel Rwanda* who became all things to all people that he may save some. Ndahiro and Rutazibwa call this narrative Rusesabagina's "narcissus complex" which they consider his "distorted perception and interpretation of himself and his deeds and misdeeds" (2008, p. 91).

The autobiography is also a product of collaborative work by Paul Rusesabagina and San Francisco Freelance journalist Tom Zoellner, which automatically affects the language and

content of the book since Zoellner brings his cultural perceptions on board. The film, the book together with the Hotel Rwanda Rusesabagina Foundation which the hotelier started becomes part of a larger profitable business empire of Rusesabagina celebrity image production under the brand name of *Hotel Rwanda*. This vast enterprise is complete with business executives, consultants, communication strategists, attorneys, lobbyists, publicists and marketers. It includes actors, directors, publishers, bank accounts, charities, speeches, medals etc... Rusesabagina the man, the character and the myth eventually merge leading to a literature/film adaptation phenomenon film scholar Kamilla Elliot describes as “De(Re)composition.” In this adaptation model, the progenitor text and the adaptation merge, decompose and recompose into “a new composition at “underground” levels of reading” (2003, p. 157). The adaptation becomes “a composite of textual and filmic signs merging in audience consciousness together with other cultural narratives and often leads to confusion as to which is the novel and which is film” (2003, p. 157). In this case, it is hard to differentiate which is Rusesabagina’s original memory and which is the Hollywood film, which is Rusesabagina and which is Don Cheadle, or Rusesabagina imitation of Cheadle as the multiple stories generated from Rusesabagina’s memory is revised endlessly through oral, written and visual mediums. Genocide history is inevitably revised, and the image, Paul Rusesabagina and the person are both rebranded. The historiography in the fill and the autobiography is best explained by Emberto Eco’s hypothesis that “In order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole” (Eco, 1988, p. 447).

Contesting heroic mythography in *Hotel Rwanda*

Fernand Braudel observes that, “To the Narrative Historians, the life of men is dominated by *dramatic accidents*, by the actions of those *exceptional beings* who occasionally emerge, and who often are the master of their own *fate* and even more of ours” (qtd. in White 2010, pp. 274-275). Rusesabagina’s memory as well as the film adaptation falls in the trap Braudel elaborates. Rusesabagina becomes the living legend whose single act of mercy weighs against the inaction of the entire International community. His act of mercy and self-sacrifice provides a beacon of hope for humanity, but as Braudel observes, such hero-worship is a “*A delusive fallacy*” [My emphases] (2010, p. 275). Besides, it does more harm to the memory of the Genocide victims since it trivializes their suffering while creating a fictional hero who gains moral and financial capital out of the film’s success. Hyden White concludes that “Myths provide imaginative justifications of our desires and at the same time hold up before us images of the cosmic forces that preclude the possibility of any perfect gratification of them” (White, 1985, p. 175). If the genocide in Rwanda was, “the failure of humanity in Rwanda” as Dallaire and Beardsley assert in their title (2004), humanity gets to win in *Hotel Rwanda* as the superhero provides propitiatory vindication for us all.

The first contestation of *Hotel Rwanda*’s heroic premise concerns Rusesabagina’s benevolent treatment of his hotel “guests.” Ndahiro and Rutazibwa assert that a huge gap exists between the reality of what happened at Hotel des Milles Collines and the myth of *Hotel Rwanda*. While the film is entertaining and highly inspirational, they say the “reality was sordid (2008, p. 41). Reacting to the idea that Rusesabagina saved the hotel refugees through his negotiation and diplomatic skills and “a few cigars,” Jean-Baptiste Kayigamba a freelance journalist who survived the hotel, is paraphrased as saying, “One would think he was dealing with overgrown

children who were not bad chaps at heart” (2008, p. 13). On the whole, the survivors interviewed by Ndahiro and Rutazibwa allege that contrary to the savior in *Hotel Rwanda*, Rusesabagina not only made life very hard for them but put some of their lives in danger. Copies of memos, SOS and other documents allegedly written by the Crisis Committee of Representatives of Displaced persons of the Hotel des Mille Collines circulated to governments, human rights organizations, international organizations and the media, show that the hotel refugees suffered greatly in the hands of Rusesabagina who turned the poor away, and demanded payments for rooms contrary to what the film and the autobiography shows (2006, p. 137). They claim that he charged for phone calls and practically made profits out of the refugees’ plight. For instance, Rusesabagina was doing business with George Rutaganda, the Interahamwe Vice Chairperson as depicted in the film, but they claim that he was selling the food to the occupants, not dishing it out for free as the film and his autobiography claims, never mind the fact that he even received money from abroad meant to help feed the refugees (Rusesabagina & Zoellner, 2006, p. 138; Ndahiro & Rutazibwa, 2008, p. 71). They even claim that Rusesabagina was not happy with the Red Cross for bringing free food and that he even sold the Red Cross rations (2008, p. 59). Jean de la Croix Ibambasi puts the irony of *Hotel Rwanda* in a wider context when he says,

There is a similarity between the way the international community abandoned Rwanda and the way it refused to acknowledge France’s role in the genocide. In the same way it neglects the impact the massacres had on the survivors and backs Rusesabagina by giving him a platform to say any nonsense (2008, p. 61).

There are even those like Jean de Dieu Mucyo who argue that Rusesabagina was a close ally of the genocidal regime and could have colluded with army headquarters (2008, p. 61). Two prominent genociders now jailed in Kigali Central Prison, Valerie Bemiriki who worked for the

notorious Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) radio, and Paul Rutaganda earlier mentioned also dismiss Rusesabagina's heroism. Bamiriki says not only did Rusesabagina do nothing to save the refugees, but he was also informing the genociders about "cockroaches" (2008, p. 64). Although I have not personally confirmed the sources of these interviews, they provide contestations of Rusesabagina's benevolent image in *Hotel Rwanda* that cannot be ignored and create challenges for genocide memory.

The second contestation concerns Rusesabagina's claim that his negotiation, appeasement skills and high-level connections is what saved the Hotel refugees. In his Autobiography, Rusesabagina says the first reason Hotel De Mille was not raided by the militia was "initial confusion—and even timidity—of the militias" and the status of the hotel which "was viewed as something not to be tampered with" (2006, p. 131). The second reason being that there were five policemen guarding the hotel thanks to his connections with police chief Commander General Augustine Ndindiliyimana, protection which was "much better than what we got from the UN which amounted to nothing" (p. 131), since the UN was "*worse* than useless" (p. 133). However, evidence from several sources show that Rusesabagina greatly downplayed the role of other stakeholders in saving the refugees. Hotel de Mille Collines was a favorite sanctuary for refugees for nine reasons: 1. It was a UN protected zone, and there was a UN flag flying overhead as well as armored UN vehicles. Before Rusesabagina arrived at the hotel, several sources confirm that UNMAIR troops were stationed there "at all times...under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Victor Moigny, whose mission was to protect the refugees" (Ndahiro & Rutazibwa, 2008, p. 25; Dallaire & Beardsley, 2004, pp. 268-269; Melvern, 2006, p. 12). Tunisian UN troops actually repelled an Interahamwe attack on the hotel and in a desperate

move, Dallaire even ordered “unharmful military observers to sleep in orphanages to deter the killers” (Melvern, 2006, p. 13). 2. There was instruction from the United States government demanding that the refugees in de Mille Collins not be harmed and the Rwandan government promised to protect the refugees and informed the RAF and the Interahamwe accordingly (Melvern, 2006, p. 14). 3. There were a number of expatriates UN peacekeepers, ICRC, MSF and top MDR officials at the hotel awaiting evacuation. Melvern considers *Hotel Rwanda*’s harsh critique of the UNAMIR troops unfortunate because they actually saved many lives. She recounts that a Polish officer Major Stec, who was a volunteer with UNAMIR went into post traumatic stress after watching *Hotel Rwanda* at the Hague, yet he was the who protected the Hotel refugees against the Interahamwe during evacuation (2006, p. 12). Romeo Dallaire who made no mention of Rusesabagina in his memoir *Shake Hands with the Devil* (2004) expressed disappointment with *Hotel Rwanda*’s portrayal of Rusesabagina saying, “it seems the filmmakers downplayed the eight UN observers who protected people in the Hotel. The Manager was there, I was aware of him, but that’s it” (qtd. in Adhikari 298). 4. The Tutsi refugees were being used as hostages by the government to show the international community that they were not killing all Tutsi’s as alleged. The government forces were also using them as a bargaining chip for a ceasefire in order to slow down the advance of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPA). The French government also used the refugees to get a UN mandate allegedly to protect the remaining Batutsi although they ended up protecting the genocidaires (2008, p. 27). 5. The visit of three prominent persons, Jose Ayalla Lasso, the UN Commissioner for Human Rights, Iqbal Riza, Kofi Anan’s deputy, and Bernard Kouchner, former Minister of Health and Humanitarian Action of France, in May 1994 to meet the de Mille Collines refugees also played a key role in their survival (2008, p. 27). 6. The RPA also made the safety of the hotel refugees a key demand for

any ceasefire negotiations. They were eventually used for prisoner exchange between government forces and RPA, which is the reason the refugees, including Rusesabagina were evacuated to safety behind RPF lines. 7. The genocidaires needed the quietness of De Mille Collines for relaxation and to plan their murderous activities. Besides, there was brisk business between Georges Rutaganda and Rusesabagina that also helped keep the hotel from attack for a while (2008, p.27-28). 8. The management of Sabena Put pressure on the Belgian government to save the hotel building and its occupants, and the Belgian government in turn prevailed on the Rwandan government. 9. According to the testimony of a Belgian liaison officer Lieutenant-Colonel Jean-Loup Deblydden, the French actually had a secret communications unit on the fifth floor of de Mille Collines, and this he considers the biggest reason the hotel survived attack. Lt. Col. Deblydden “was surprised to hear later that if the hotel was not attacked by the RAF and the Interahamwe militia it was thanks to the manager’s bravery” (2008, p. 27). These accounts show that the 1,268 survivors of de Mille Collines could not have possibly escaped because of Rusesabagina’s “words,” “cognac” and cash bribery, even though he saved some.

The Hollywood Hero verses Rwandan Heroes

The big hero and big romance template of classical Hollywood narratology is evident in the construction of Rusesabagina in *Hotel Rwanda*. Rusesabagina’s goodness rebukes and at the same time exonerates the international community and shows that even in the darkest of places, there is that rare capacity for human good. His wife Tatiana expresses the director’s point of view when she says in their hide out on top of the hotel; “Paul Rusesabagina, you are a *good* man!” Leitch calls this mode of cinematic engagement with history, “heroic self transcendence” where the filmmaker extracts the character from his historical context and makes him a “free

agent” whose heroism emanates from within him and whose heroic acts are credited to him without external mediations. As Leitch asserts, “The films scrupulously recreate their historical settings while insisting on their heroes’ essential freedom from historical imperatives, their status in history as agents of history who are not agents of history” (2009, p. 301). These films try as much as possible to avoid ideological interpretation of events and chose instead to “celebrate the triumph of the human spirit” in an “Ideological vacuum” (2009, p. 299). *Hotel Rwanda* creates such a hero while disengaging him from the realities of his place and time during the Rwandan genocide. As Catherine Billey notes, “Mr. George had sought to communicate the psychological terror of the experience rather than the blood bath” (para. 4). In choosing to avoid dealing with the violence directly and the political and historical context of the genocide that would explain the reason for its occurrence and creating instead a heroic and romantic drama, the film reinforces stereotypes of Africa as a place of senseless violence(2007, p. 281).

Ironically, the internationally acclaimed Hollywood hero is not considered a hero in Rwanda, at least not by the Kagame regime and has been branded as an “imposter” who faked up his story (Crown, para. 3). Rwandans continue to celebrate their own heroes, many of whom remain anonymous. A few high witness accounts of heroic exploits recorded at the Kigali Genocide Memorial include among others; Tutsi’s in Bisesero led by Aminadabu Birara and Simeon Karamaga, who resisted the Interahamwe for a week and were only defeated by presidential guard reinforcements (*jenocide*, 2004, p. 30). Other groups resisted at Bugasera, at Murumbi, and St Andre (p.30). Others were Hutu heroes who saved their Tutsi neighbors; people like Yahya Nsengiyuvna who saved over 30 people, Sula Karuhimbi who protected and fed 17 people, Jean-Marie Vianney Gisagara a Hutu burgomaster who preached love and convinced his

councilors not to carry out the genocide orders; he later paid with his own life. Others include Frodouald Karuhije who saved 14 Tutsis in Gitarama, and Damas Mutezintare Gisamba who saved up to 400 people in his orphanage at Nyamirambo (pp. 30-31). Even at de Mille Collines, survivors interviewed by Ndahiro and Rutazibwa say the true hero of de Mille Collines is not Rusesabagina but a one Victor Munyarugerero. They say he is the man who risked his life by ferrying in refugees, going out to look for food for them and even pledged to pay for the accommodation of some people who were being thrown out by Rusesabagina (2008, pp. 77-78). These evidences show that *Hotel Rwanda* celebrated Rusesabagina at the expense of many sincere heroes of the genocide.

***Hotel Rwanda* and Contemporary Rwandan Politics.**

On the release of *Hotel Rwanda*, the former hotel manager shot to fame internationally winning many awards including; the Immortal Chaplains Prize for Humanity 2000, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Civil Rights Museum Freedom Ward, the Humanitarian Award from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation 2005, and recently, the Lantos Human Rights Prize 2011. The hotelier formed The Hotel Rwanda Rusesabagina Foundation with the mission of helping orphans and widows of the Rwandan genocide, but Rusesabagina's humanitarian mission has also been questioned. Allegations that he has been raising money to fund Forces Democratiques de Liberation du Rwanda (FDLR) terrorists (exiled architects and perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide implicated in horrendous killings and mass rape in eastern Congo) culminated in his arrest and questioning in Brussels in June 2011. The Rwandan Prosecutor General, Martin Ngoga claims to have irrefutable evidence that Rusesabagina repeatedly wired large sums of

money to the FDLR through Western Union (Hotel Rwanda Movie Hero 'arrested'). Rusesabagina, however, claims that he wired the money to help orphans in Uganda, a claim that has been disputed ("The noose is tightening").

Rusesabagina has also formed his own political party, PDR-Imuhire with a view of contesting the Rwandan presidency. His critics say Rusesabagina has a right to contest for president, but "should not, and should never, use our dead to achieve this end" (2008, p. 90). The Hollywood hero has also been accused of plotting with the FDLR fugitives to overthrow the Kagame regime (2008, p. 89). The official message from Rusesabagina on his foundation's website reads, "For those whose lives have been ruled by injustice and hatred, the Hotel Rwanda Rusesabagina Foundation brings you a message of peace and hope for a brighter tomorrow" (Hotel Rwanda Rusesabagina...). If these allegations prove true, then the dramatic irony is immense, especially since the Hotel Rwanda Rusesabagina Foundation also claims to work to "Prevent future genocides and raise awareness of the need for a new truth and reconciliation process" (Hotel Rwanda Rusesabagina...). Even more disturbing, Rusesabagina has been accused of genocide negationism for dismissing the Tutsi genocide altogether and redefining it as "massacres or killings" (2008, p. 85). He is said to have postulated in many interviews and public lectures a new theory about the reverse "genocide of Hutu intellectuals" perpetuated by the Kagame regime, thereby introducing "the idea of a double genocide" (87). Ndahiro and Privat observe that Rusesabagina's rhetoric sounds more and more like the Parmehutu ideology of HUTU power which gave birth to the mini-genocides of 1956, 1962, 1966, 1973, 1990, 1992, and eventually to the holocaust of 1994 (2008, p. 87).

Conclusion

The case of *Hotel Rwanda* demonstrates the dangerous terrain of trauma aesthetics and its ethical complexities. Where is the balance between entertainment and artistic responsibility, between creativity and fidelity to history, and more importantly, genocide memory? *Hotel Rwanda* excels as a blockbuster entertainment, and pricked the conscience of the world focusing attention on Rwanda, but it scores badly in its commitment to genocide memory. I often hear people say, why should you take film that seriously knowing it is a fictional medium. Yet films shape public opinion as is evidenced with the controversy surrounding *Hotel Rwanda*'s hero, with political consequences that affect post genocide peace and reconciliation. The controversy emanates from *Hotel Rwanda*'s appropriation of the code "Based on a true story." The fact-based assumptions of the film and—film influenced—autobiography blurs the boundaries between history and fiction, and by asserting the film's heroic elevation of Rusesabagina as reality, it betrays the victims of the Tutsi genocide. Rusesabagina's memory "text" aside, there is a problem with the filmic and autobiographical mediums as well because, as White earlier cited observes, any medium that employs "emplotment" fictionalizes reality. The other challenge is the superimposition of a western concept of heroism in representing an Africa experience. This is responsible for silencing competing heroic discourses about the Rwandan genocide and the Mille Collines episode in particular, and promoting the "heroic self-transcendence" of a single individual for dramatic effect. I conclude with some advice from Ndahiro and Rutazibwa that I find worth heeding:

we beg those involved in cinematographic, literary or scientific activities who may have a chance to deal with a subject connected with the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda...to

constantly bear in mind the absolute necessity to respect the truth in order to keep the memory of the genocide pure and protect it from lies (98).

This is a plea filmmakers, creative writers and autobiographers would do well to heed if they are to exercise artistic responsibility, respect genocide memory and all its attendant traumatic legacies and foster genuine peace and reconciliation in Rwanda.

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